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Complex spy swap: East German superspy for West German agents

By Elizabeth Pond
Staff correspondent of
The Christian Science Monitor

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A spectacular six-nation spy swap appears to be under way here in Europe.

At time of writing there was no official confirmation of this. But copious reports of such a swap were meeting with a conspicuous lack of official denials in West Germany.

In one of the most complex trades and coincidences in the shadowy world of espionage, say these reports and apparent leaks, East German superspy Günter Guillaume is being pardoned and freed by West Germany. And a James Bond escape story of three years ago is turning into a John le Carré in-from-the-cold coup.

According to the reports, one Soviet agent jailed in South Africa, one East German agent in France, one East German in Denmark, and possibly three other East Germans in West Germany are to be returned to their home countries along with Mr. Guillaume. The spy in France is Gen. Heinz Bernhart Zorn; the one in Denmark, Jörg Meyer.

In return, some 30 to 60 West German prisoners in East German jails — "among whom are some West German agents," in the coy phraseology of the thorough West German press leaks — are supposed to be released to West Germany.

And some 3,000 family members of East Germans previously ransomed by West Germany are said to be coming to join their husbands, fathers, or other immediate relatives in West Germany in the near future. In the by-now routine trade-off, West Germany reportedly will pay East Germany several million deutsche marks worth of goods to free these family members.

Probably no outsider will ever penetrate the mirror game of convoluted images, of truth and fiction, of deception, counterdeception, and self-deception in all of these histories. But so far it looks like this:

The James Bond escape took place in January 1979. A West German "mole" who had held a high position in East German intelligence had just come West with a list of East German spies in West Germany. A good number of these were arrested, but a few slipped out of the net. One of the latter was Reiner Paul Fülle, an accomplished athlete who suddenly bolted from his unarmed guards, leaving them sprawled on treacherous ice.

There was a public uproar for a couple of weeks about the incompetence of the West German federal criminal office, and then nothing more was heard of Fülle — until September of this year. At that point Fülle mysteriously reappeared in West Germany — "voluntarily," the federal prosecutor's office cryptically announced.

Now the news magazine Der Spiegel has just come out with a sensational scoop claiming that Fülle became a double agent for West Germany after he was smuggled back to East Germany by Soviet agents. His motivation was said to be boredom with his hemmed-in life in East Germany, plus a wish to rejoin his family, which had declined to follow him back East.

Mr. Guillaume's case is even more complicated. The highest placed spy that East Berlin ever succeeded in planting in West Germany, Guillaume was the then Chancellor Willy Brandt's personal assistant, with access to top-level secrets. His unmasking in 1974 led to Mr. Brandt's resignation, and Guillaume was sentenced in 1975 to 13 years' imprisonment.

Paradoxically, Guillaume's very success proved to be something of an embarrassment to East Berlin, since the years of Brandt's incumbency were also the years of the rapprochement of West and East Germany after two decades of cold war hostility. So strong was East German opposition to this Soviet-ordered détente that the Kremlin had to ease veteran party leader Walter Ulbricht out of office in East Berlin before the normalization could be completed.

It has long been conventional wisdom that Guillaume would have to be traded soon if his bargaining power — as measured in the high 1:7 East-West ratio of this reported spy swap — was to be taken at its peak. In another year he would have served two-thirds of his term and, as an ill man, would almost certainly have been released on parole under West German law.

The whole complex swap package and return of Fülle involves a mix of intelligence service loyalty to agents, the sowing of mistrust of their own agents among rival services, and the ambiguity of East-West German relations during a time of very troubled superpower relations.

On the one hand, the morale of spies and new recruits depends partly on their confidence that their agencies will eventually bail them out of jail and bestow honors on them if they get caught. Hence the importance of periodically trading off jailed agents to maintain this confidence.

On the other hand, the confidence of the agencies in the reliability of their own spies can be undermined by repeated defections. Hence the importance to West Germany of periodically producing high-ranking double agents and casting doubt on the once-infallible image of the tough East German intelligence service.

As for the ambiguity of East-West German relations, this is underscored once more by the positive signal of a major ransom deal for East Germans wishing to emigrate to West Germany. About once a year such a deal is struck, in one of the world's most open secrets.

The number of people in the current reported exchange is unusually high, however, and this is taken as a sign that East Berlin wants to keep the East-West German relationship alive — despite prevailing superpower tensions. West Germany pays through the teeth each time it gets a batch of would-be East German escapees — but Bonn still considers this an improvement over having escapees machine-gunned at the border.

Already speculation has begun that the latest reported accommodation might smoothe the way to a long delayed East-West German summit meeting.